

Appropriating Hawthorne: The Fourfold Symbols in the Scarlet Letter

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter unmistakably is a realistic novel, but its central themes take on profound symbolic value. The purpose of this article is to decipher the primary symbols in the novel The Scarlet Letter and to come up with an appropriate understanding of these symbols and what they stand for. For this purpose, the article is inspired by a number of scholars who address the significance of the symbols from different perspectives. The general contours of these scholars can increase our understanding of the nature and function of symbols in human culture and henceforth navigate our way around the symbolic territory of the novel, exploring each one separately. In doing so, we are prompted to offer an appropriate interpretation of the symbolic language embodied in Hawthorne's plot creativity.

Key words: *Nathaniel Hawthorne, Symbol, The Scarlet Letter, The Letter 'A', Rosebush, Forest, Meteor.*

Introduction

The Scarlet Letter (1850) by the North American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) is widely recognised as the author's "masterpiece" (Reynolds 3). Framed in seventeenth-century New England and inhabited by the first puritan communities from English territory, it constitutes a critique of what the author considers fanaticism and false morality of Puritanism. It tells the story of Esther Perrin; a woman who is accused of adultery and condemned to carry on her chest the red letter 'A' as a sign of adultery. Throughout the story, Esther does not reveal the identity of her daughter's father, and tries to live in an unjust and hypocritical society with dignity. Her partner in crime, the Reverend Dimmesdale, does not also reveal his sin and thus remains a respected member of the community.

Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* has been marked by the proliferation of symbolic elements. Underlying these symbols is an array of themes – love, justice, grace, tragedy, vengeance, pain and suffering, just to name a few. This study has the task of examining its major symbols. For this task, considerations will be given to the work of a number of scholars who have introduced various views for investigating the nature of the symbols and their significance in human development. We begin by discussing these views, and thereafter discuss the main symbols within the novel, analysing each one separately. We are prompted to offer an interpretation of the symbolic language embodied in Hawthorne's plot creativity.

The Omnipresent Nature of Symbols

Symbols are ubiquitous. From cave paintings to present day, symbols are tied to man's life. What is a symbol? How does it relate to the individual and/or society? In talking about the *symbol*, it is noteworthy to define the term. Etymologically the term *symbol* has its origin in ancient Greek that designates, according to Peyre, "a portion of an object (a piece of pottery, for example) broken in two." From this definition, it designates a "gesture of hospitality on the part of a host to offer to a guest one of two such fragments as a sign of trust" so that they could recognise each other in a later time. This short definition provides essential information based on recognition. Indeed, a symbol must be recognisable at least by the two protagonists wielding it.

Peyre also adds that the Greek word *symbol* means "'to throw together', that is to unite in an immediate fusion the concrete or external sign and the thing it signifies." To sum up, the word symbol means 'to unite', 'to bind,' 'connect' or 'designate' an element that is in the place of something which can be either an object or a concept or an idea, with a certain property, thus possessing a transcendental relation (6).

This etymological definition of the word *symbol* does not suffice if we tend to define it in terms of its content; content in which various schools hold diverse views. Philosophers, psychoanalysts, theologians, linguists, anthropologists and others, each has assumed a particular perspective on the nature of symbols and their role in human development. However, we shall not enter into the difficult task of discussing these views. Instead, we will discuss some typical definitions of the term based on three positions: psychology, philosophy and literature. By working out this family of positions, we shall discover that they are, to some extent, unified by the fact that they all hold that symbols are essential to human beings and to their understanding in the world.

The first position is psychology for which David Fontana is an exemplary figure. He iterates this position in the very beginning of his book, *The Secret Language of Symbols*:

“The symbols are profound expressions of human nature. They have occurred in all cultures and at all times, and from their first appearance in the Paleolithic cave paintings they have accompanied the development of civilization...in their correct context, they still speak powerfully to us, simultaneously addressing our intellect, emotions and spirit.” (Fontana 8)

As the quotation above shows, Fontana places the symbols at the center of our being by bringing us an account of the role played by symbols from the very beginning of the human history. The symbols, Fontana tells us, exert a universal value since they are closely linked to the communication of people from the earliest times to the present day.

In psychoanalytical perspective, the term *symbol* takes a substantive form. Sigmund Freud, for example, conceives the symbol as a central category for human beings. He contends that symbols represent more than something created by human imagination; they are privileged medium for expressing the repressed desires in the unconscious. Freud's assumption is that unpleasant contents are translated into symbolic images. These symbols can be brought into consciousness and made aware by use of dreams. The task of a psychoanalyst is essentially an interpretive one, that is to make meaning of these symbols. Therefore, a good psychoanalyst is the one who takes the symbol situated at the level of the unconscious, into meaning situated at the level of the conscious. For Freud, “myths and fairy tales, jokes, folklore, customs, sayings and songs” are all modes of symbolisation and require erotic or sexual interpretations (Snowden 65- 67).

Carl Gustav Jung takes up the Freudian concept of the symbol and puts it in a way that moves it a step further. According to Jung, “a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life... it implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us” (20). In turn, Jung adds “a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning” (20). Unlike Freud who conceives symbols as representations of forbidden desires in the individual’s unconscious, Jung highlights the universal aspect of the symbol. According to Jung, symbols are generated “spontaneously” of some deep inner power of “the collective unconscious” (55, 107). Hence, we will see Jung stress, among other things, that in order to understand an individual’s symbol, we need first to go into “his cultural background” (92). Jung introduces the term “archetypes” which he defines as standard symbols that take their essence in a universal heritage (67- 68). For Jung, the archetypical symbols correspond to a set of patterns inherent in human nature and shared by the whole society or even humanity.

In philosophy, the status of symbols and their function in human existence have also been topics of scholarly attention. In philosophical hermeneutics, the question of the symbol becomes an even more powerful in terms of meaning. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, contends, “I have decided to define, i.e., limit, the notions of symbol and interpretations through one

another. Thus a symbol is a double-meaning linguistic expression that requires all interpretation, and interpretation is a work of understanding that aims at deciphering symbols” (9). One could say that the symbol for Ricoeur is a sign, albeit in distinct functionality, characterised by its “opacity,” an opacity which is due to the fact that a symbol sends off the immediate meaning to a deeper meaning (31). Such would be the essential function of the symbol for Ricoeur: it is that which has the faculty of diverting the avowed meaning into a hidden meaning (12). One possible implication of Ricoeur’s philosophy is that symbols are ubiquitous; they allow human beings to pass from the plane of the concrete to that of the concept, thanks to which people can navigate themselves around their own meaningful world.

A parallel position– albeit quite fundamental–can also be found via an examination of Ernest Cassirer’s view. Cassirer famously defines human being as “an animal symbolicum” rather than “an animal rationale” (44). This is quite striking. Cassirer’s remark immediately draws our attention to the omnipresent aspect of symbols in human nature. If man is distinguished from animals, according to Cassirer’s definition, it is not by virtue of a substantial property that animals lack (for example by the possession of an ‘immortal soul’ or ‘reason’), but in terms of the characteristic function of its mind: man lives in another domain of reality, namely a symbolic domain (45). Put differently, precisely because man has this essential nature of constructing the world by symbolisation processes, he should be denoted as a symbolic animal.

In literature, a symbol is a particular object, image, word or sound that represents something other than their actual meaning. It "suggests a connection between the ordinary sense of reality and a moral or spiritual order" (Quinn 408). The association between “a concrete image” and “an emotion or an abstract idea” completes this definition (Cuddon 940). Worded bluntly, it is possible to say that the symbol designates the process by which an author expresses abstract qualities such as truth, justice, pity, courage, love, wisdom and et cetera. One can safely say that literary works tend to display a ubiquitous mood for the use of symbols, as Symons contends when making his case for the primacy of this mood, “without symbolism there can be no literature” (1). We have then no difficulty concluding that a literary work, among other key things, is a symbolic enterprise. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully observe the objects that each author often describes, the images he uses, the colours and themes he reiterates in his writings, in order to decipher his symbolic world. Hawthorn’s *The Scarlet Letter* is no exception: it achieves its meaning precisely by being a symbolic novel. Therefore, as readers when examining the novel, understanding its symbols is an important task. They help us recognise the message being transmitted; discover its inner world and its cultural sediments.

The Fourfold Symbols of the Scarlet Letter

The novel *The Scarlet Letter* depicts a scenario of the early Puritan New England where it addresses the forbidden passion between a sensitive and religious young man, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, and Hester Prynne, a beautiful and attractive young lady. In that scenario Hawthorne builds the plot of *The Scarlet Letter*, which is highly symbolic and the reader has to crack these symbols in order to understand its major themes. However, in an article of this space, we shall not discuss all of the symbols in the novel. Instead, we will focus only on four primary symbols. Our focus is no mere arbitrary; we think that the novel is centered on these symbols.

The Letter ‘A’

The scarlet letter ‘A’ is undoubtedly the most noticeable symbol in the novel: its presence in the title of the novel serves to remind us of this. The ‘A’ letter appears at various times within the novel and suggests various meanings. At first it appears like the immoral act of adultery, the shame, happening to be part of the identity of Hester. The letter "A" symbolises the beginning of the protagonist’s suffering, public humiliation and exclusion from the middle conservative society. In the Second Chapter, Hawthorne writes:

“On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore...was that Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom” (43-44).

Thus, soon after Hester was condemned to wear the emblem of adultery throughout her life, the inhabitants of Puritan New England began to see her through different eyes and as an impure and sinful woman who committed adultery.

The letter ‘A’ does not just symbolise the act of adultery. Hawthorne links the letter to another cluster of meanings such as aloneness, alienation and isolation. Hawthorne intends to invoke these meanings when writing about the kind of effect that the letter has on Hester, “It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself” (44). Thus, the letter ‘A’ is associated as much with Hester’s sinful act as it is with her alienated life. Hawthorne writes, “Lonely as was Hester’s situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want” (65).

However, in Chapter Thirteen, the letter 'A' generates a different meaning from that what is associated with. People remarks, "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge?' They would say to strangers. 'It is our Hester—the town's own Hester—who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!' (127). Thanks to her talent of embroidery, Hester would realise a true transmutation of the status of the letter 'A', disconnecting it from its former meaning of shame into an adornment and even a real talisman. So writes Hawthorne "the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all peril" (128).

The culminating point in the transformation of this meaning of the letter 'A' can be summarised as this, "It was reported, and believed by many, that an Indian had drawn his arrow against the badge, and that the missile stuck it, but fell harmless to the ground" (128). For Hawthorne then the scarlet letter 'A' is evolved through a blending of meanings: starting up from the symbol of 'adultery' through 'alienation' and ends up into the symbol of 'angel', one of humility and generosity.

The Rosebush

The Scarlet Letter can be read as the story of a wild rose that grows near "burdock, pig-wed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation" (Hawthorne 39). According to Kirk, "The rosebush is a strong image developed by Hawthorne which, to the sophisticated reader, may sum up the whole story" (17). Hawthorne sources out the wild rose by writing that "it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door" (40). One meaning of the rosebush and its symbolic place in the novel is to give the story a glimmer of hope of escaping the fragility of human nature and the sorrow of life. So Hawthorne writes that the wild rose "may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow" (40).

It is noteworthy that Hawthorne opens the first chapter in the novel on the rosebush to express the human ability to survive the worst torments. Although the rosebush lived amid a harsh place with "unsightly vegetation," nature was able to grant mercy and kindness to those who passed by. Hawthorne remarks that there "was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of nature could pity and be kind to him" (39)

Furthermore, the rosebush also symbolises passion. Since "it is a predominant image throughout the romance," as Kirk asserts, we can say that the narrator is simply intending to

use the rose as a metaphor to symbolise the story of a forbidden and sinful act of love between Hester and Arthur (17).

The Forest

The forest is symbolically important in the novel. It is a subtle mix of both the free world and the dark world. At first, the Puritan inhabitants are superstitious; they are haunted by the fear of evil embodied by a fantasized “black man” living in the forest (62). Portrayed this way, the forest is the home of witches and all kinds of supernatural forces. Thus, the forest is the abode of “the Devil, dark, shadowy, momentarily filled with sunlight, but always the home of those who would break the rules and those who listen to their passions” (Kirk 8).

The forest is consigned to the dark forces because it is “a symbolic place where witches gather, souls are signed away to the devil” (Kirk 97). This representation is better made clear by Mistress Hibbins when she says to Hester, “Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I well-nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one ... had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man’s book too ,and that with mine own blood” (98).

However, if the forest represents a diabolic place containing the darkest secrets in the eyes of the people, it means freedom for Hester and her lover Dimmesdale. The forest is akin to freedom because it is a safe refuge where people can meet, be themselves and disclose secrets. It is the place where Dimmesdale openly expresses his love to Hester, and she can do the same for him. No one can see what happens in that forest and no one can report misbehaviours. Therefore, this suggests that the individuals may do things as they wish. In chapter sixteen Hawthorne writes, “Hester Prynne made a step or two towards the track that led through the forest, but still remained under the deep shadow of the trees. She beheld the minister advancing along the path, entirely alone, and leaning on a staff which he had cut by the wayside” (160).

The above quotation neatly encapsulates the point Hawthorne makes that the forest is associated with freedom. For it is “a symbol for a place of license, where the constraints of the city and community may be thrown off, where sin may take place unpunished, where light and shadow are mixed” (Bloom 38-39). Taken as a refuge, Hester “undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet letter and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance among the withered leaves” (158). Therefore, the forest created for Hester a space of tangible freedom in the world in which she can take off her letter for a short period of time, only to put it back on her chest upon her returning home.

The Meteor

Like other celestial phenomena, meteors have long fascinated human beings; those stones falling from the sky are fairly, and often alarmingly, common in the seventeenth-century Puritan world. They are considered divine signs. To this, Hawthorne observes, “Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena, that occurred with less regularity than the rise and set of sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source” (121-122).

Hawthorne also gives a contextual discussion of the meteor in chapter twelve thereby the reader learns that when Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester Prynne and Pearl, a scarlet meteor appears, tracing “an immense letter, - the letter A, - marked out in lines of dull red light” (122). On this occasion, Hawthorne writes, “Dimmesdale had done speaking, a light gleamed for and wide over all the muffled sky. It was doubtless caused by one of those meteors, which the night-watcher may so often observe burning out to waste, in the vacant regions of the atmosphere” (130).

The quotation above clearly suggests how the characters in the novel are constantly seeking out natural symbols, which they claim to be messages from God. Yet these characters are not willing to accept any message at face value. Hawthorne “indicates that the meaning [of the sign] is in the mind of the beholder” (Kirk 48). People thus interpret these signs subjectively and only in ways that confirm their own reformulated ideas or opinions. Hawthorne intends to offer two possible meanings of what the *A*-shaped meteor stands for: One meaning is associated with the townspeople: it stands for *Angel* referring to the colony’s former governor Winthrop who has just died and become an angel (Kirk 48). The other meaning, experienced by the minister Dimmesdale, affirms his sinful deed. Hawthorne thus writes:

“We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter –the letter A–marked out in lines of dull red light .not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil of cloud, but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it, or, at least, with so little definiteness, that another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it.” (122)

The *A*-shaped meteor in the sky, like the scarlet letter ‘A’ for Hester, refers to Dimmesdale as being coward and fearful and, to a large extent a hypocrite by carrying the guilt of preaching one thing and practicing another. After all, he is not courageous enough to assume his shared sin, turning his back on his lover and leaving her to the sad fate of having to face all the humiliation and contempt of the community. Hence, the meteor, among other things, could symbolize Dimmesdale’s weakness and cowardice.



Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the great classics of American literature. It tells the story of seventeenth-century America as Hawthorne understands it. The novel begins with a public trial in a square to Hester Prynne, before the eyes of her husband, newly returned after a two years absence. She is condemned to carry the letter 'A' as a mark of adultery. But throughout the novel, she shows her strength in her attempt to rebuild her life. Her partner in crime, the Reverend Dimmesdale, does not reveal his sin and thus remains a respected member of the community. But his guilt produces great remorse throughout the novel.

Telling the story of these events, the novel seeks to present its readers with a deep insight into the rigid and strict Puritan society by highlighting the rulebook of a strictly puritanical community for which the Bible and the law are one. The novel does not, however, lend itself to a direct reading. For the novel is no mere brute territory; it is endowed with symbolic elements. In the course of this article, we follow the discussion of the four striking symbols present in it: the title *The Scarlet Letter* sets the first symbol in the novel. At first the letter 'A' stands for 'adulteress', but by the end of the novel it begins to stand out as 'angel'. The 'rose' symbolises nature and passion as well. The forest is as much concerned with darkness as with freedom; and finally the meteor that suggests two different meanings: one of which refers to the angel-like character of the late governor, and the other to Dimmesdale's share of adultery.

We can now conclude by saying that, in all these major symbols, the novel could be interpreted as a critique of the hypocrisy of those who pretend to maintain an immaculate image, while in the shade they show otherwise. Or, perhaps, we can also see the end of this novel as a vindication of puritanism values: it is always better to publicly confess your sins and try to redeem yourself as you can, than to hide and destroy yourself.



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